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ABSTRACT

This report describes a program for using explicit instruction of reading strategies through the implementation of guided reading groups to improve student comprehension. The targeted population consisted of elementary school students in growing, middle class communities, located in northern Illinois. Evidence for the existence of a deficiency of reading skills included teacher surveys, reading inventories, and student interviews. After reviewing probable cause data, research revealed that students exhibited a lack of ability to use reading strategies. It was also disclosed that students did not attempt to relate what they read to what they knew. Furthermore, reports showed that materials used in classrooms were not conducive to engaging students. A review of literature provided various strategies for intervention. Research indicated that explicit instruction of reading strategies through the use of guided reading groups was a viable solution. Tools such as graphic organizers should be implemented as well as allowing ample time for independent reading. Post intervention data indicated an increase in student reading comprehension. There was also a crossover observed into other content areas. Appendixes contain the teacher survey, lesson plans, and graphic organizers. (Contains 21 references, 6 tables, and 10 figures.) (Author/RS)

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COMPREHENSION: THE KEY TO READING SUCCESS

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Thank you Gary for your constant love and support. I would not have been able to reach this goal without your patience. To my Mom and Dad, the light is shining bright—finally!

K.C.

To my husband and parents without whom I could not have conceived of doing this. And, furthermore, to the clip! J.D.

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Et. Al.

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CHAPTER 1

PROBLEM STATEMENT AND CONTEXT

General Statement of the Problem

The students of the targeted first, third, fourth, and fifth grade classes exhibited a deficiency in reading skills, which were displayed through their lack of ability to create meaning from different types of text. Evidence for the existence of such a problem included teacher surveys, reading inventories, and student reflections.

Immediate Problem Context

Site A, a third grade classroom, was located in an area that consisted of suburban and rural living situations. The school had 566 students in attendance. It was a Kindergarten through fifth grade school.

According to the "2000 State School Report Card", the demographics of the student population consisted of 93.8% White, 1.2% Black, 1.9% Hispanic, 2.5% Asian Pacific, and 0.5% Native American. Of the 566 students, 1.4% were from low-income housing. Attendance patterns showed 95.8% of the students attended school regularly, a mobility rate of 7.2%, and no chronic truancy rate.

Site A had a principal, a part time assistant principal, and 25 regular classroom teachers with an average of 16.5 years of experience. Fourteen of these teachers held

Masters Degrees and 11 have their Bachelors of Arts in teaching and two have doctoral degrees. Additional certified staff included a special education teacher, an L.D. teacher, two P.E. teachers, an art teacher, a music teacher, a band/orchestra teacher, a reading resource teacher, and a learning center director. All the teachers were of White descent. There also were six instruction aides and five inclusion aids due to the large number of students and the diversity of the needs of the students.

Students had the opportunity to participate in Woods Club, Chess Club, Book Fair, Spring Sing, P.E. Night, Band, Orchestra, Outdoor Education, Ski Night, Art Fair, Literature Festival, AVIC, Junior Great Books, Student Council, Sock Hop, Apple Valley Graduation, and Math Night. Parents had the opportunity to be a part of the Parent Teacher Organization.

Site A is a 30 year old, multilevel brick structure with four to five sections per grade level. The building houses kindergarten through fifth grade. Due to the increase in school population, two mobile units housing four classrooms were added to the school at the beginning of the 2001 school year. Music, art, physical education, a learning resource center, teachers' lounge/workroom, community room/lunch room, nine resource classroom, and a self-contained learning disabilities classroom rooms are also located in the main building.

Site B was located in a school on the southwest corner of two major intersections in a northwest suburb of a major city. It had an enrollment of 600 students, coming from a variety of neighborhoods that reflect various socio-economic groups. The students came from a diverse population of 71% White, 10% Black, 12% Hispanic, and 7% Asian. Approximately 50% of the students are transported by bus while the rest are within

walking distance. Attendance percentages for the last 3 years are higher than the state and district averages. Student mobility is only 6%, far below state and district averages (State School Report Card, 2000).

The staff consisted of 25 regular classroom teachers, 2 resource teachers, a principal, 4 itinerant special teachers in art, music, and physical education, a 3 day social worker, a 4 day speech teacher, a 2 1/2 day nurse, 2 part-time reading support teachers, a 1 day psychologist, 2 secretaries, 5 resource assistants, a library paraprofessional, and 2 custodians. Eighty percent of the certified staff held masters degrees with additional hours. Teachers at Site B have taught an average of 14.095 years. The average salary of teacher at this site was $38,600 (School Improvement Plan, 2001).

The Site B school was built in 1954. Three additions have enlarged the building to its present size. Twenty-three classes are housed in the building and two in mobiles. Within each classroom there was a great difference of ability levels that ranged from being at risk to gifted students. The staff at the site recognized that children are ready to learn at different ages and stages and fosters a learning climate that accommodates various learning styles.

The school program at Site B consists of literacy/senior volunteers, a leveled bookroom, a publishing center, Reading Counts program, partnership with VFW Women's Auxiliary, Battle of the Books (B.O.B.), peer tutoring program, reading support teachers, DARE program, Second-Step violence prevention program, Young Authors, band, orchestra, and chorus.

Site C, located approximately 30 miles west of a major city, began providing its services to the community as an open school in 1971. Since that time few permanent

walls and many moveable walls have been added to yield various areas referred to by the staff as pods. Site C was located on 12 acres of land in a residential area. Besides the building, the site possesses a parking lot, a field, and a playground. To each side of the building are houses. Houses are also across the street from the school; however, behind the school is a field and playground that lead to more residential housing. An office area, 30 classrooms, a learning center, a gymnasium, a computer lab, a multipurpose room, and various closet sized storage areas, which were converted into offices, comprise this one floor brick school.

Each classroom within the building contained a monitor with a video player. Each classroom also had at least one computer. Site C had three computers. Overhead projectors were also provided.

Site C was a fourth grade classroom in an elementary school containing preschool through grade six. Special education classes were also housed at this site as well as one of the district's School Within A School (SWAS) programs for gifted mathematics and science students. The total number of students enrolled at the school was 567 with an average class size of 23. The fourth grade targeted, however, had 22 students, which was consistent with both the district and state averages (State School Report Card, 2000). One of the 22 students was learning disabled and had a full time assistant. Another student was autistic and also had a full time assistant. A visually impaired student joined the class for social studies.

The diversity of the school's student population was as follows: 77% White, 6.6% Black, 8.0% Hispanic, and 7.7% Asian/Pacific Islander. Limited-English proficient students made up 4.7% of the total population while 10.3% of the total population was

low-income. The last two percentages were below both the district and state averages. The chronic truancy rate of 0.8% was only slightly lower than the district's average of 0.9% and substantially below the state's average of 2.4%. The average daily attendance at this school was 95.6%. While the 19.2% mobility rate was minimally below the district's rate of 21.6%, the figure was somewhat above the state's rate of 17.5% (State School Report Card, 2000).

The staff numbered 56 with 92% female. Certified staff comprised 67.0% of the faculty. Of the certified staff, 60% earned degrees beyond a bachelor's degree. The site had one administrator. There were 21 regular education teachers, two behavior development teachers (one primary and one intermediate), and an educable mentally handicapped teacher (primary). The site also had the following full time staff: a reading specialist, a mathematics specialist, a vision impaired resource teacher, a speech and language teacher, a learning disabilities resource teacher, a collaborative interventionist, social worker, and an art teacher. The school shared a music teacher, a physical education teacher, a nurse and a nurse's assistant, and a technology assistance person with other schools. The support staff consisted of a secretary, a clerical assistant, a day custodian, and a night custodian. A full time paraprofessional and a part-time library assistant were also in place. There was a lunch supervisor, an assistant to the supervisor, and many moms who helped. There were 10 assistants for students for special education students and two assistants for the vision impaired students. There was minimal ethnic diversity of the staff with 96.0% White and only 2.0% for both Black and Hispanic. No other ethnicity was represented.

Site C offered a number of programs besides the already mentioned SWAS. The parent/teacher organization was extremely active and supportive of the students and teachers. In the school's recent evaluation by the state, the sixth grades' outdoor education and musical were held out as examples of programs that not only involved the students but parents and community as well. The sixth grade classes also involved the whole school in a canceled stamp collecting campaign to help a group of disabled adults in Germany. The sixth grade also granted scholarships to former students graduating from high school. Fifth grade students participated in the D.A.R.E. program in the fall. The fifth grade also had a Famous Americans Awards Ceremony. Fourth grade had a State Fair. The art teacher offered a special art class to intermediate students. Battle of the Books (B.O.B.) was also available to intermediate students. Two other programs offered to intermediate students were band and orchestra. Fifth and sixth graders served as patrols. Available to gifted primary students was the Challenge Explorers program. There were a number of programs in which all could participate. Grandmas was one such program. Every Tuesday residents of a local retirement center came to take an active part in the students' education. The Rainbow of Respect was another program in which all could participate. Student conflict managers were trained to solve problems that occur on the playground. All students were encouraged to show off their writing talents by participating in Young Authors.

Sites D and E were located in a district with six schools 35 miles west of Chicago. The sites were located in a kindergarten-fifth grade elementary school. Approximately 600 students were in attendance. The student population was relatively homogeneous with the majority being from middle to upper middle class homes. The minority

population of the school was relatively small. Approximately 97% of the population was White. Low-income families constituted less than 1%(0.5) of the student population. Students meeting Limited-English proficiency requirements made-up 0.5% of the population. Student attendance averages around 96% (State School Report Card, 2000).

The sites' school employed a staff of 30 full time teachers with an average of 14 years experience. Nine of those teachers hold two Master Degrees, fifteen have a single Masters, and six have their Bachelor of Arts in Education (School Survey, 2001).

The school provides an early reading intervention program called Project Success. Other students have the opportunity to participate in enrichment activities such as "Breakfast with Books", Junior Great Books, and various book clubs. Spanish is being taught before and after school. Fifth graders participate in D.A.R.E. and Junior Achievement. They also have the opportunity to be in band or orchestra. Students focus on building community and asset building through student council, Abbee's kids, and plant a row. The school also implements a school-wide conflict management program.

The facility was built in 1964 on a 14-acre combination School/Park District site. The original building housed 13 classrooms. In 1988, a 10 classroom addition, along with a new gymnasium was added to the facility. In November of 1995, another four classroom wing was added to accommodate the student population growth. The one story building includes two beautiful courtyards and is surrounded by playground, a baseball field, and a wooded bird sanctuary. The computer lab comes fully equipped with the latest in technology. The library is located in the center of the building and offers a wide variety of resources both to teachers and students.

The Surrounding Community

Site A is part of a district with 11,140 students. The district had 10 elementary schools, 3 middle schools, 2 high schools, and 1 special education building. The district has a total of 585 classroom teachers. The demographics of the teachers was 99.8% White and 0.2% Hispanic. Overall, the teachers had 13.9 years of experience with 36% having bachelor's degrees and 64% having a master's degree.

The surrounding community for Site A has gone through many rapid changes in the past 10 years. The area at one time was a small river town, but has grown tremendously in the past 20 years and continues to present. According to the "2000 State School Report Card," the socioeconomic status of the general population consisted of a combination of upper echelon, middle class and lower class income. The lower class residents form 4.5% of the population.

The community consisted of residents from a variety of different ethnic backgrounds. Residents of White descent accounted for 94.58% of the population. Hispanic residents accounted for 5.5% of the population while black residents made up 1.86% of the population. The American Indian population accounted for .37% of the population and Asian Pacific Islanders made up 2.16% of the population. The remaining 2.04% of the population consisted of other race origins.

The district that includes sites B and C is made up of 3 early childhood centers, 38 elementary schools, 7 middle schools, 4 high schools, and 1 alternative high school. At the time of this study, the total enrollment consisted of 22,503 elementary students, 5,469 middle school students, and 9,733 high school students yielding a total of 37,705 students. The administrative structure of this district was as follows: an elected school

board, one superintendent, four area superintendents, 52 school principals, and 2,644 teachers.

The community had a diverse population comprised of 79.70% White, 16.78% Hispanic, 9.60% Asian/Pacific Islander, 4.25% black, 0.71% American Indian, and 8.46% other race. The socio-economic status of those people living within the immediate area was low middle to middle class.

The school district for sites D and E is comprised of six attendance centers. This includes four elementary buildings (K-5), one middle school (6-8), and one high school (9-12), housing in excess of 4,800 students. At the time of this study elementary enrollment (K-5) was 2,336, middle school was 1,164, and the high school housed 1,280 students.

The district employed 297 certified staff with 272 non-certified staff for a total of approximately 569 employees in the entire certified and non-certified population.

New and expanding housing developments are significantly impacting the enrollment of each of the attendance centers. The student mobility rate of the District however remains well below state average. Student performance on nationally standardized achievement tests continues to indicate performance levels above state and national norms.

National Context of the Problem

"Concern about students' reading abilities has been expressed at local, state, and national levels as well as in the broader political arena" (Bryant, Vaugh, Linan-Thompsong, Ugel, Hamff, Hougen, 2000, p. 238). President Clinton declared, "40% of our 8 year olds cannot read on their own" (State of the Union Address, 1997, para. 6).

Newly elected President Bush expressed the need to continue with the challenge "to make sure every child can read independently by the end of third grade" (State of the Union Address, 1997, para. 6).

"Reading is harder now," Ogle stated (Allen, 2000, para. 4). Students are faced with a wide range of materials that need to be read for varying purposes, but strategies for interpreting these texts are not being taught. "In a technological society, the demands for higher literacy are every increasing, creating more grievous consequences for those who fall short" (National Research Council, 1998, para. 1).

The view of teaching comprehension has changed dramatically in the last 15 years.

> Once thought of as a natural result of decoding plus oral language, comprehension is now viewed as a much more complex process involving knowledge, experience, thinking, and teaching. It depends heavily on knowledge-both about the world at large and the worlds of language and print. Comprehension inherently involves inferential and evaluative thinking, not just literal reproduction of the author's words. Most important, it can be taught directly (Fielding and Pearson, 1994, para. 2).

As stated in Dr. Adam's research "The goal of reading instruction is to make the process of reading words effortless and automatic so that the mind can be free to reflect on meaning" (Diamond, Mandel, 1996, para.). Providing a balanced approach to reading will enable students to better meet the demands of the vast variety of materials they will encounter in an ever-changing society.

CHAPTER 2

PROBLEM DOCUMENTATION

Problem Evidence

A teacher survey (Appendix A) was completed by the staff at the various sites to determine if there was a deficiency in the reading skills of the students. It was completed by teachers of kindergarten through sixth grades. The surveys addressed the students' use of comprehension strategies. A summary of the results of this survey is presented in table one.

Table 1

Teacher Survey

	Consistently	Most of the time	Sometimes	Never
Question 1	3	33	28	1
Question 2	10	31	24	0
Question 3	2	23	36	4
Question 4	2	23	30	10
Question 5	0	10	18	37

Of the 65 teachers surveyed, 5% felt that students consistently used comprehension strategies independently. Thirty seven percent thought that students used comprehension strategies most of the time. Forty two percent of teachers felt that students sometimes

used comprehension strategies. Sixteen percent thought that students never used comprehension strategies.

In order to document the student's deficiency in reading skills, two reading inventories were administered. The Ekwall/Shanker Reading Inventory was used for the two first grade classes. The third, fourth, and fifth grades used the Qualitative Reading Inventory-3. These were individually administered reading inventories that measured implicit and explicit comprehension. Only the narrative portion of the inventories was administered. A summary of the results of this testing is presented in Tables 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6.

Table 2

Site A Reading Inventory Results

Instructional Reading Level	Primer	One	Two	Three	Four	Five	Six	Upper Middle School
Number of Students	0	4	5	7	2	0	1	0

Table 3

Site B Reading Inventory Results

Instructional Reading Level	Primer	One	Two	Three	Four	Five	Six	Upper Middle School
Number of Students	0	3	1	5	3	2	7	2

Table 4

Site C Reading Inventory Results

Instructional Reading Level	Primer	One	Two	Three	Four	Five	Six	Upper Middle School
Number of Students	0	4	4	1	4	3	2	0

Table 5

Site D Reading Inventory Results

Instructional Reading Level	Primer	One	Two	Three	Four	Five	Six	Upper Middle School
Number of Students	18	0	2	0	0	0	0	0

Table 6

Site E Reading Inventory Results

Instructional Reading Level	Primer	One	Two	Three	Four	Five	Six	Upper Middle School
Number of Students	16	3	2	0	0	0	0	0

At site A, a third grade, 57% of the students were reading below grade level. Site B, a fifth grade, had 54% of the students reading below grade level.

Fifty nine percent of the students at site C, a fourth grade, were reading below grade level. In the first grade class of site D, 65% were reading below grade level. Site E, a first grade, had 76% of students reading below grade level. These results showed that of the students tested, over half were reading below grade level.

Probable Causes

Research indicates several possible causes for deficiencies in reading comprehension among students. One of the problems is the professional mystique that surrounds the teaching of reading. Many parents feel inadequate to teach their children to read due to a perception that teaching reading is too complicated. This feeling of inadequacy leads to ineffective reading programs in schools because "a school which fails to take its parents along with it in the process of implementing innovative teaching procedures in reading risk significant problems in this implementation" (Wray, 1992, p. 2).

Furthermore, many students begin their school career at-risk for reading difficulties because they have had limited language experiences. Whether the factors are environmental or genetic, the impact is felt in the early years of reading instruction. "Individuals who are most at risk for reading difficulties are those who enter school with limited exposure to oral language interactions and little prior understanding of concepts related to the sounds of our language, letter knowledge, print awareness, and general verbal skills" (Lyon, 1997, p. 7). This causes deficits in the skills that are needed to become a proficient reader.

In addition, many students lack either the prior knowledge or the ability to use that knowledge to help them understand what they are reading. "Students who have background knowledge about a topic have a real advantage because they can connect the new information they encounter to what they already know" (Harvey, 2000, p. 75). If students cannot relate to what they are reading, their retention of the material will be less and the fulfillment of reading will be lacking due to the fact that it is unrelated to what they know.

Children with reading deficiencies often exhibit poor decoding skills. "If readers take too much time and mental effort decoding individual words, they can't attend to passage meaning" (Honig, 1997, p. 16). Particularly at lower grades, the ability to decode often correlates with lack of reading comprehension. Research shows that word recognition needs to be an automatic process. Only then can students become actively engaged in making meaning from text.

Students may lack strategies to read, but required materials compound the problem. "Although textbooks frequently are poorly written, incoherent, and fail to show relations between information, students are expected to use them as a primary source of information" (Dickson, 1998, para. 5). Difficulties arise for students because the main ideas in the text are not stated clearly and many of the concepts and ideas are not explicitly related to the main idea of the passage. This makes it difficult for the students to bridge what they are learning to what they already know.

Although a number of students demonstrate the ability to read at or above grade level, many of these children choose not to read. "Perhaps they are not experiencing the satisfaction reading can bring" (Fountas, 2001, p. 9). If students do not find reading satisfying, then they are not going to do it. Many teachers do not take the time to find what their students are interested in or motivated by, so students do not find reading engaging.

Students lack the ability to extrapolate key information from text in content areas. Interpreting graphics, charts, and maps is a skill also found to be deficient among students. Strategies to interpret this information are not being taught in the primary years. In addition, it is difficult to provide primary students with nonfiction texts that prepare

them to read this genre. "Beyond the primary grades, students need to grapple with texts that are expository, dense, and full of new, more difficult vocabulary, especially in math, science, and social studies" (Allen, 2000, para. 3). Because they are not being taught these skills, their comprehension is impeded in content areas.

CHAPTER 3

THE SOLUTION STRATEGY

Literature Review

The question of how best to teach comprehension strategies to students is one that has been well researched. Within the past few years, this topic has been brought to the forefront because of declining reading scores. The importance of reading lies in the comprehension of the written text. Simple word recognition does not ensure that the author's intent has been discovered. Many solutions have been offered to remedy these reading comprehension difficulties.

One such solution for successful reading comprehension is for the teacher to provide a sufficient amount of time for actual text reading. The more the students practice reading, the better they will become in using comprehension strategies. According to Fielding and Pearson, it is necessary to spend more time on the actual reading of text than learning the mechanics of reading. Students should also be given an opportunity to make their own text selections and read at their own level. Teachers should encourage multiple readings of a text for greater comprehension (Fielding, 1994).

One way to ensure that students receive enough time to read is through implementing reader's workshop. One part of reader's workshop is independent reading.

During independent reading, students are given time to practice their comprehension strategies. Students with a wide range of reading abilities can read for information and pleasure. "The struggling reader gets as much time to read as the gifted and talented reader" (Wulf-McGrath, 2000, para. 15). Reader's workshop helps them to learn and apply meaningful strategies to difficult text readings.

Another way to ensure ample time for students to read text is through silent sustained reading. During this time, students learn that they can use the strategies that are being taught to work through difficult spots in reading on their own. This helps the students to increase their confidence in their reading abilities. This increased confidence then leads to students reading more often for recreational purposes, which leads to stronger reading proficiency (Hopkins, 1997).

Guided reading is another instructional method that can be used to increase student's comprehension. This strategy can enhance any existing literacy program. "The purpose of guided reading is to meet the varying instructional needs of all the students in your class, enabling them to greatly expand their reading powers" (Fountas, 2001, p. 191). In guided reading, the teacher works with a small group of children that have similar levels of reading. This gives students the opportunity to develop as individual readers while participating in a socially supported activity. Students are able to develop reading strategies so they can read increasingly difficult texts individually. Using these strategies successfully is the ultimate goal of guided reading.

Guided reading also offers the teacher opportunities to observe and assess in an ongoing process. It allows teachers to make accurate text selections and create appropriate groups. This allows for flexible grouping.

Flexible grouping is defined as groups of students put together for a specific learning task. Once the task is accomplished, the group disbands, and the process begins anew. "Flexible grouping fulfills a variety of purposes, from enabling students to use their strongest modalities and promoting group interaction to the teaching of specific skills" (Opitz, 1999, pp. 35-6). Opitz reasoned that flexible grouping is in direct contrast with ability grouping. Whereas ability groups are formed based on children's total reading achievement, flexible groups are created to allow children to use their strengths and to learn specific reading skills.

Shared reading is an instructional method that compliments guided reading. This method provides a non-threatening, social environment for instruction. In shared reading, students follow along with the text as an expert reads with fluency and expression. The expert engages the students by demonstrating effective thinking processes throughout the text. Through this, the task of comprehending is shared and helps students expand their literacy understanding. During shared reading, all students are able to experience successful use of reading strategies. This helps them develop confidence in their independent reading (Fountas, 2001, p. 37).

Studies have shown that in any successful reading program there needs to be a variety of comprehension strategies taught to ensure learning. Enhancing a reading program using different strategies offers the opportunity for each student to learn using their own learning style. Reading instruction is a complicated process in which there needs to be a connection made from the reader to the text and context of the reading. All these components are key to improving reading comprehension. The classroom teacher needs to understand the goal of their reading program, and then use the proper strategies

to achieve that goal. These strategies should actively engage the students in a process where they build a bridge between what they know and the new information being taught (Kirylo, 2000).

One important strategy that builds this bridge is making connections. There are three types of connections that students need to be taught how to make: text to self, text to text, and text to world. Making these connections enhances the reader's understanding of the text while helping them connect new information to their prior knowledge or experiences.

> Our prior experience and background knowledge fuel the connections we make. The books we read, the authors we choose, the discussions we have, our past experiences, the newspaper, the evening news, the weekly magazines, the Internet, and nightly dinner table conversations all forge connections that lead to new insight (Harvey, 2000, p. 68).

The connections that are made need to be meaningful and authentic in order to support comprehension and deepen student's understanding of the text. Although children may have trouble using this strategy in a meaningful way, teacher and peer modeling over time will allow them to refine this skill.

A natural progression from our connections and background knowledge is creating meaningful questions. Good questions require students to be interested in the topic. They also require students to discern between what they know and what they need to know. Questioning indicates that students are monitoring their comprehension and interacting with the text to construct meaning.

According to Harvey and Goudvis, there are six types of questions that students are encouraged to make:

> Questions that are answered in the text
>
> Questions that are answered from someone's background knowledge
>
> Questions whose answers can be inferred from the text
>
> Questions that can be answered by further discussion
>
> Questions that require further research to be answered
>
> Questions that signal confusion (2000, p. 85)

These question categories should be introduced slowly and deliberately to the students. New categories should be introduced when students display aptitude with the old ones.

In addition, visualizing text enhances comprehension for students while reading either nonfiction or fictional text. When engaging in visualization readers are generating pictures in their minds that are theirs alone. "Visualizing strengthens inferential thinking. Visualizing is in fact inferring, but with mental images rather than words and thoughts. Visualizing and inferring are first cousins, the offspring of connecting and questioning. Hand in hand, they enhance understanding" (Harvey, 2000, p. 96).

Visualizing involves reading the words of the text and blending the reader's preconceived ideas to produce pictures in the mind. When students combine the words from the text with their prior knowledge this helps them to create mental images that bring understanding and life to what they are reading. Keene (1997) stated,

> I've concluded that the sensory images that surface as we read are a type of Impressionism of the mind. The images are like dabs of paint on a canvas. Just as each brush stroke is meaningless until the viewer stands back to regard the whole

> painting, each images created in the mind while reading has little meaning unless we associate it with words on the page and with other images and memories in our own lives (p. 126).

When students read they reach beyond the limits of the literal meaning of the text to their experiences and beliefs. This creates a new interpretation, an inference. "Inference is part rational, part mystical, part definable, and part beyond definition. Individual's life experiences, logic, wisdom, creativity, and thoughtfulness, set against the text they are reading, form the crux of new meaning. Because each person's experiences are different, the art of inferring takes the reader beyond the text to a place only he or she can go" (Keene, 1997, pp. 147-8).

Inferring is the process in which students create personal meaning from the text. It is the combination of a mental process of what is read with prior knowledge (schema). The interpretation of the text is the product of this union. The proficient reader is able to create meaning that is not explicitly stated in the text. They are able to make predictions, use background knowledge to answer questions and make connections between conclusions they have made and their prior knowledge (Keene, 1997. pp. 147-162).

"Determining important ideas and information in text is central to making sense of reading and moving toward insight" (Harvey, 2000, p. 118). In order to learn, readers need to decide what is important in the text. Teachers often use nonfiction to teach this strategy. Overviewing, a form of skimming and scanning, is an early start to determining importance of text. When students overview, they first decide whether it is necessary to skim or carefully read the material. Highlighting is another technique used to determine importance. "To effectively highlight text, readers need to read the text, think about it,

and make conscious decisions about what they need to remember and learn" (Harvey, 2000, p. 119). Students should use cue words, illustrations, graphics, text organizers, or text structures in order to sort important information from less important details.

"Synthesis is about organizing the different pieces to create a mosaic, a meaning, a beauty, greater than the sum of each shiny piece" (Keene, 2000, p. 169). It is merging new information with our prior knowledge to create an original idea. Our thinking slowly evolves as we encounter new information. We naturally attempt to construct meaning, but we do not always succeed. "Synthesizing lies on a continuum of evolving thinking. Synthesizing runs the gamut from taking stock of meaning while reading to achieving new insight. Introducing the strategy of synthesizing in reading, then, primarily involves teaching the reader to stop every so often and think about what she has read. Each piece of additional information enhances the reader's understanding and allows her to better construct meaning" (Harvey, 2000, p. 144). At the highest level, a student will not only make meaning from text, but also create a new perspective about what she had read.

This process involves ordering, recalling, retelling, and recreating information from the text. To engage students in synthesizing text, they must be encouraged to have a personal interaction with the text. These personal responses give readers time to explore their thinking. Synthesizing weaves words and ideas from the text with the reader's personal thoughts and questions and gives the reader an opportunity to develop a new perspective (Harvey, 2000).

"Much of our responsibility when teaching reading is to make what is implicit, explicit" (Harvey, 2000, p. 12). While reading to students, the teacher must stop periodically to share how this particular reader is processing the written word. This

modeling of a reader's thinking is how reading comprehension strategies are explicitly taught. The explicit teaching of strategies shows students how to successfully use a strategy that he or she will then be required to practice. Without this knowledge, students will be unable to apply the strategies appropriately in their independent reading.

In spite of the fact that in expository text ideas and concepts are placed in logical or sequential order, students have difficulty discerning the main ideas and supportive points from text. To facilitate their understanding, direct instruction is needed before, during and after the reading of the material.

In the last few years concerns were raised that students are having difficulty comprehending nonfiction and informational texts. Nonfiction texts require special reading skills in which students need to organize patterns and learn technical vocabulary. There is a reading strategy, however, that is specifically designed to help readers develop the connections they need to understand nonfiction text; namely, the vocabulary anchor. The vocabulary anchor is a graphic teaching strategy that bridges problem solving concepts with prior knowledge. It enables the student to understand semantic information such as names, lists, and rules by integrating an association to places, context, and emotion. By repeated use of this strategy, students learn to encode and retrieve information from memory (Winters, 2001).

To teach students to think, read and write more effectively in content areas there needs to be methods of instruction that incorporate both text structure and concept mapping. Using these methods of instruction students are able to bridge their reading and writing to content subjects. Concept mapping is a method that offers students the opportunity to translate ideas and concepts into visual, graphic displays. Concept

mapping will help the students see how the ideas they will be reading about will relate to what they already know about the topic.

> Concept maps become idealized graphic representations of text structures. Such idealized plans help students form mental constructs or schemata of how texts are organized. Because concept maps portray model plans of text structure, students formulate mental plans of comprehending and composing as they read and write (Sinatra, 2000, p. 266).

Storymapping is another graphic representation for students to construct meaning from text. Its purpose is to enable students to recognize and analyze the different facets of a story, namely setting, characters, problem or conflict, events, and resolution. Many elements of a storymap will differ from student to student due to point of view and interaction with the text. "Storymapping helps students internalize the structure of stories; it is useful for aiding understanding of new stories and writing original stories" (Routman, 1991, p. 96).

The ability to decode words is highly correlated with reading comprehension. Students are unable to understand print unless they become automatic and proficient in decoding and learning new words. "Decoding gives students a sense of success, confidence, and independence in figuring out and remembering a new word" (Honig, 1997, p. 18). On the other hand, students who are unable to decode may experience frustration and decreased comprehension of text.

Students enjoy being read to at any age. Text comprehension may be improved by encouraging students to use their sense of hearing. Teachers often read aloud to their students; however, books on tape can be an effective way of using the senses to improve

reading comprehension. Some students have the ability to be more actively involved in listening to the material rather than using all their energy decoding text (Muskingum College, 2001).

Reading comprehension strategies provide students with the necessary tools to create meaning from a variety of text. Children are often asked to show their thinking through the use of these tools. "When readers interact with the texts they read, reading becomes important. Reading shapes and even changes thinking. Getting readers to think when they read, to develop an awareness of their thinking, and to use strategies that help them comprehend are the primary goals of comprehension instruction" (Harvey, 2000, p. 5).

The following project objectives, action plan, and assessments were developed in the Summer of 2001.

Project Objectives and Processes

As a result of implementing guided reading during the period of September 2001 to December 2001, the targeted first, third, fourth, and fifth grade classes will improve their ability to create meaning from text, as measured by a reading inventory, teacher observations, and a written/visual response sheet.

In order to accomplish the project objective, the following processes are necessary:

1. A written/visual response sheet that measures creating meaning from text will be developed.
2. Guided reading instruction will be implemented.

3. A set of lesson plans that use explicit instruction about accessing prior knowledge, using graphic organizers, and making connections (text to text, text to self, and text to world) will be developed.

4. A checklist to monitor the teachers' implementation of strategies will be developed.

5. Anecdotal records will be kept by the researchers to document student progress.

Project Action Plan

The action plan for the research project was designed to incorporate guided reading into the reading program of the targeted grade levels. The first week of the school year was used to acquaint the researchers with each of their targeted groups. The intervention period was begun on September 10, 2001 and continued for twelve weeks until November 30, 2001. Each targeted grade level followed the general action plan outline listed below. See Appendix B for samples of grade lesson plans.

I. Action Research Planning

- A. Develop checklist
  - 1. Teacher strategy monitoring
- B. Create visual/written responses for making connections
- C. Create/gather graphic organizers
- D. Teacher training in reading inventory

II. Action Plan Calendar

- A. Weeks 1-3 – September 10-28
  - 1. Administer reading inventory to students

2. Set up guidelines for independent work to be done during guided reading group time

B. Week 4 – October 1-5

1. Introduce procedures for implementing guided reading groups

2. Focus on explicit instruction of activating prior knowledge

C. Weeks 5-7 – October 8-26

1. Continue instruction on activating prior knowledge

2. Focus on explicit instruction on making connections (text to text, text to self, text to world)

D. Week 8 – October 29 – November 2

1. Continue instruction on activating prior knowledge

2. Continue instruction on making connections

3. Focus on explicit instruction of graphic organizer A

E. Week 9 – November 5-9

1. Continue instruction on activating prior knowledge

2. Continue instruction on making connections

3. Continue instruction of graphic organizer A

4. Focus on explicit instruction of graphic organizer B

F. Week 10 – November 12-16

1. Continue instruction on activating prior knowledge

2. Continue instruction on making connections

3. Continue instruction of graphic organizers A and B

4. Focus on explicit instruction of graphic organizer C

G. Weeks 11-12 – November 19-30

1. Re-administer reading inventory

Methods of Assessment

There are three major methods of assessment that will be used to measure the effects of the proposed Action Plan. These methods include written/visual responses, a reading inventory, and teacher observations documented in anecdotal records. The written/visual response sheet and anecdotal records will be ongoing throughout the implementation of the Action Plan. The reading inventory will be administered at the beginning and end of the Action Plan.

The teacher-made written/visual response sheet was designed to record the students' application of the skills being taught. The students will be asked to complete the response sheet throughout the proposed Action Plan to check for application of the skills.

Throughout the implementation of the proposed Action Plan, the researchers will maintain on-going anecdotal records supported by teacher observations. Through these observations, determinations will be made in regard to the effects of this Action Plan on students' comprehension in the targeted elementary schools.

CHAPTER 4

PROJECT RESULTS

Historical Description of the Intervention

The objective of this project was to improve the students' ability to create meaning from text. The implementation of guided reading groups, and the strategies of activating prior knowledge and making connections were selected to achieve the desired outcome.

The first 4 weeks of the action plan were spent assessing the students' reading skills and comprehension levels using the Ekwall/Shanker Reading Inventory and Qualitative Reading Inventory-3. This information was used to facilitate the placement of students into guided reading groups. These guided reading groups met weekly for approximately 20 minutes, 2 to 4 times a week. During these guided reading groups the strategies of activating prior knowledge and making connections were modeled and practiced. Lesson plans devoted to each of these skills can be found in Appendix B. Graphic organizers were used to reinforce and assess these skills. Samples of these graphic organizers are located in Appendix C. This continued for 10 weeks.

Presentation and Analysis of Results

In order to assess the effects of using guided reading on students' comprehension, the students were assessed at the end of the 10 weeks using the above named assessments.

This data was compiled and then compared with the data gathered in September. This comparison is presented in Figures 1 through 5.

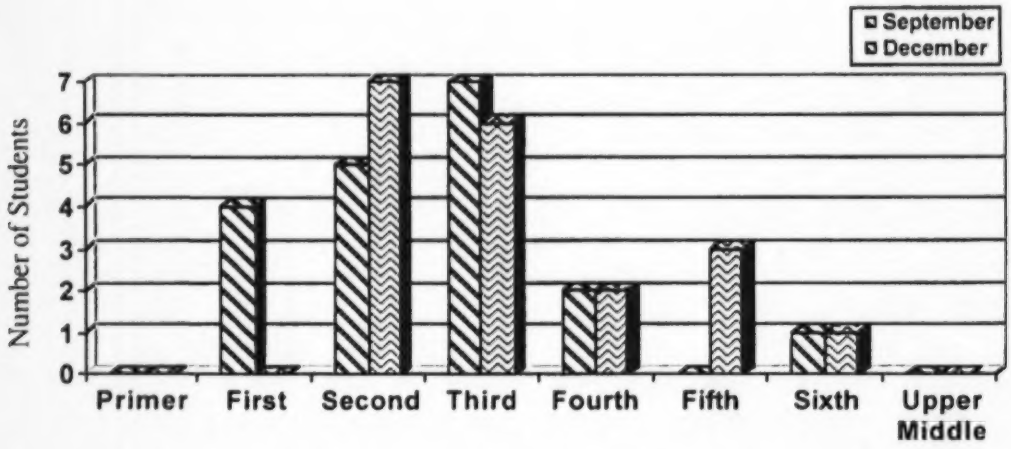

Figure 1. Site A reading comprehension levels prior to and after intervention.

This intervention seems to have had a positive effect on the reading comprehension of the students at Site A. In September, 47% of the students were reading below grade level and 53% were reading at or above grade level. Contrasting this with the results of December's testing, it is shown that there was a 10% increase in students reading at or above grade level. This resulted in 37% reading below grade level and 63% reading at or above grade level.

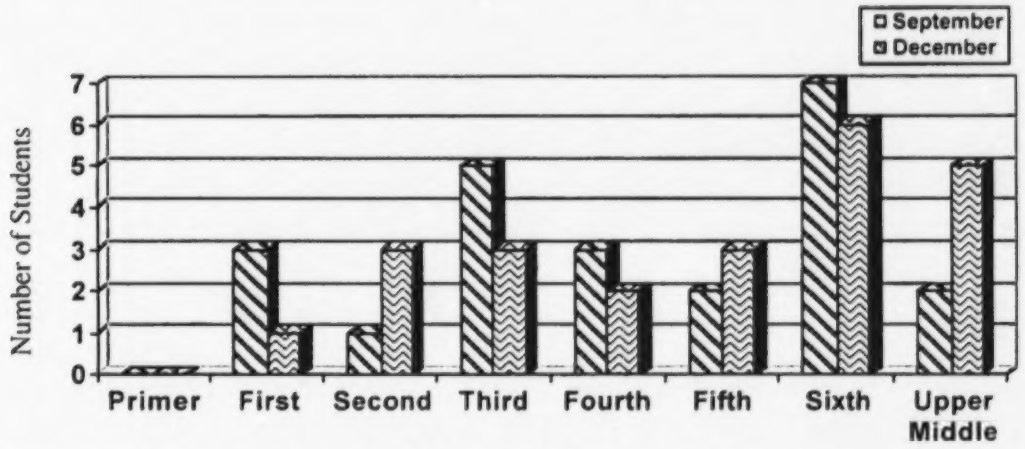

Figure 2. Site B reading comprehension levels prior to and after intervention.

The use of reading comprehension strategies in guided reading groups appears to have had a positive effect at all reading levels at Site B. Of particular note is the increase of students reading at or above grade level from September to December. In September, 48% of students were reading at or above grade level. This increased by 13% in December, to show 61% of students reading at or above grade level.

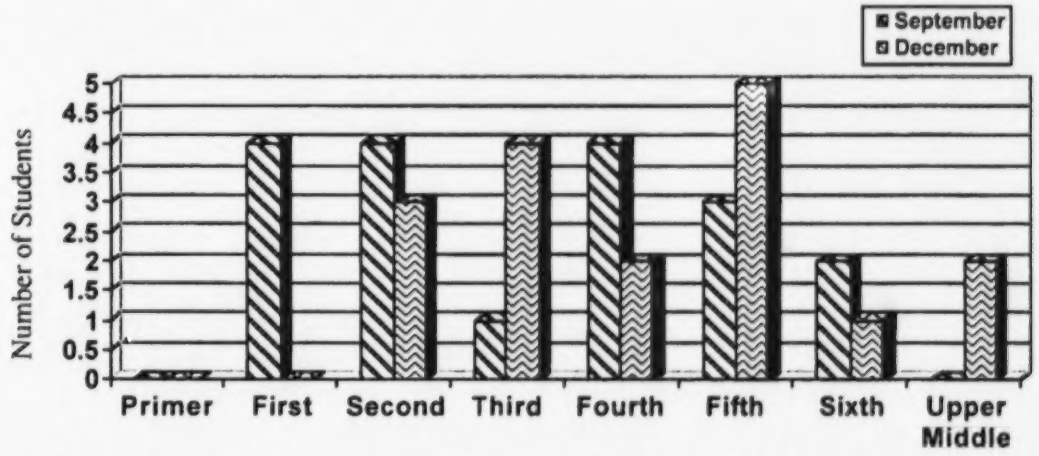

Figure 3. Site C reading comprehension levels prior to and after intervention.

The effect of the implementation of guided reading resulted in an increase in the percentage of students reading at or above grade level at. Prior to the initiation the

intervention 50% of the students at Site C were reading at or above grade level. The results of post testing indicated that 59% of the students were comprehending at or above grade level. This shows a 9 % increase in students comprehending at or above grade level.

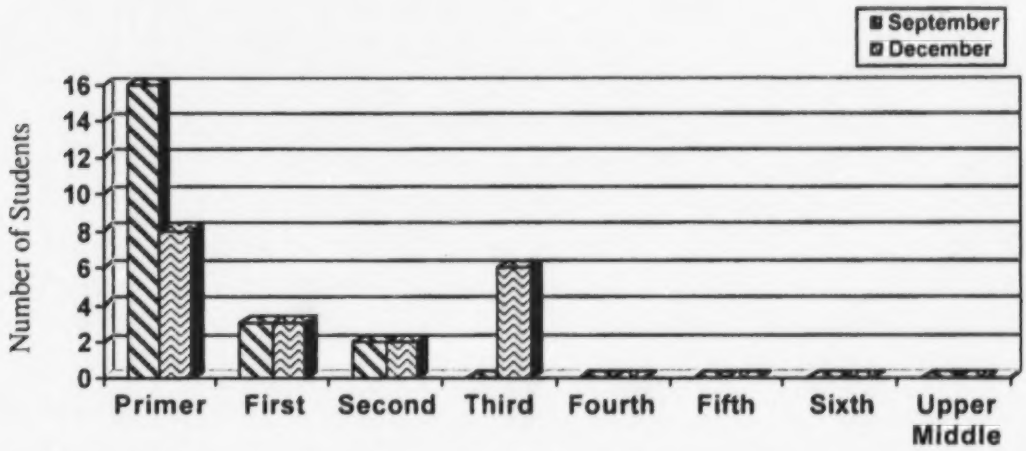

Figure 4. Site D reading comprehension levels prior to and after intervention.

There was a significant increase in students reading at or above grade level after the implementation of the intervention at Site D. In September, 90% of the students were reading below grade level and 10% were reading at or above grade level. This dramatically changed in December to show 40 % of the students reading below grade level and 60% reading at or above grade level. The increase in students in reading at or above grade level was 50% after the intervention.

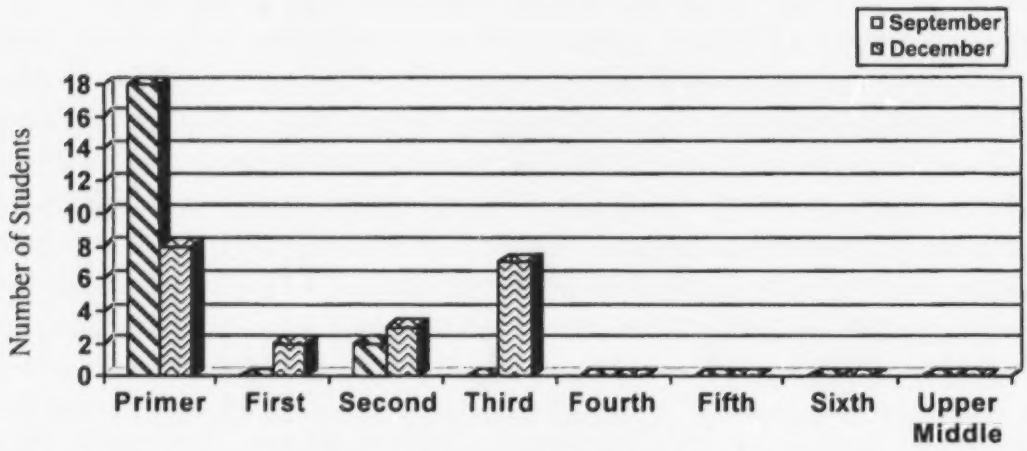

Figure 5. Site E reading comprehension levels prior to and after intervention.

Site E reflected similar positive results in reading comprehension levels after the implementation of the intervention. In September, 52% of students were reading below grade level and 48% of students were reading at or above grade level. There was an increase in students reading at or above grade level of 14%. This resulted in 38% of students reading below grade level and 62% of students reading at or above grade level.

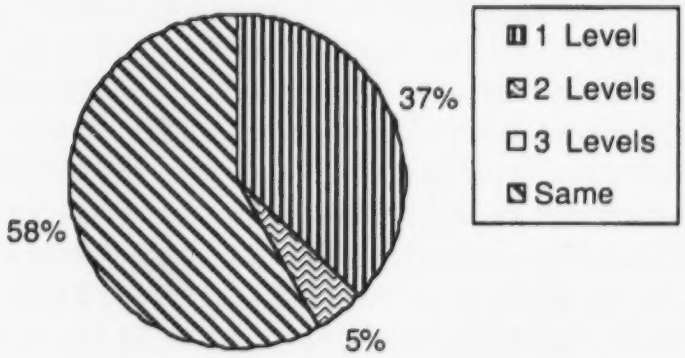

Figure 6. Site A post intervention reading comprehension level changes

After the intervention, almost half of the students at site A showed an increase in comprehension. This is indicated by 37% of the students improving their comprehension by one grade level and 5% of students improving by two grade levels. The other 58% of students did not show an increase in comprehension, but did not show a decrease either.

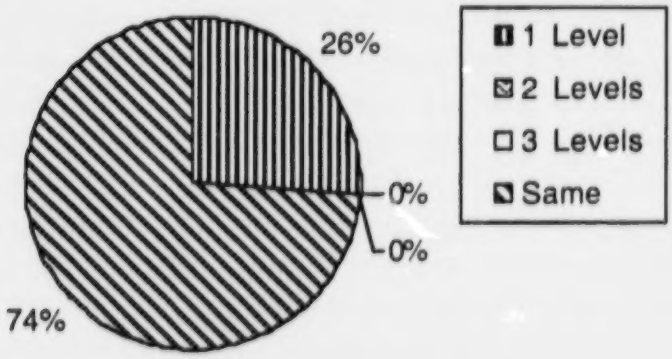

Figure 7. Site B post intervention reading comprehension level changes.

A little over a quarter of the students at Site B showed an increase in reading comprehension levels after the implementation of comprehension strategies during guided reading groups. Site B had 26% of students increase by one grade level and 74% of students remained at their same grade level. There were no students who decreased in grade level.

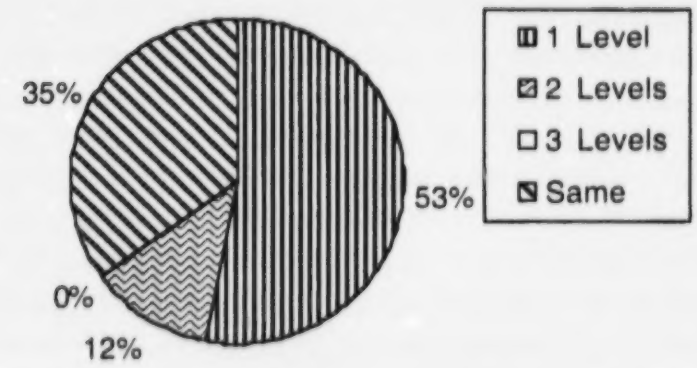

Figure 8. Site C. post intervention reading comprehension level changes.

Positive gains in reading comprehension were achieved by 65 % of the students at Site C. Twelve percent of the students increased two grade levels and 53 % increased by one grade level. There were no students who decreased in reading comprehension.

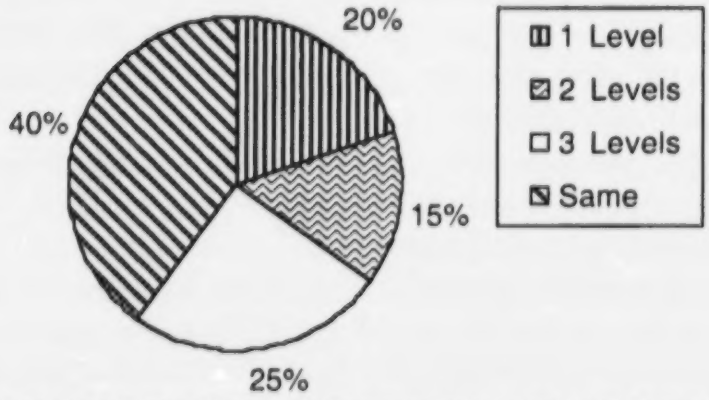

Figure 9. Site D post intervention reading comprehension level changes.

Students of Site D showed considerable improvement after the implementation of the intervention. Sixty percent of the students increased in their reading comprehension levels. Of the 60%, 20% of the students increased by one grade level, 15% increased by two grade levels, and 25% increased by three levels. Forty percent of the students remained at the same level.

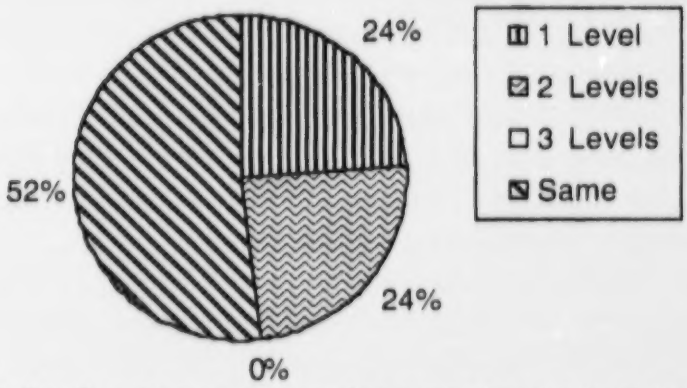

Figure 10. Site E post intervention reading comprehension level changes.

Approximately half of the students at Site E increased their reading comprehension levels. Twenty-four percent of the students increased by one grade level and 24% increased by two grade levels. The remaining 52% stayed at the same grade level.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Based on the presentation and analysis of the data on reading comprehension, the students showed an increase in their ability to comprehend text. The use of guided reading for strategy instruction proved to be an effective model. Guided reading groups allowed for presenting the students with text that met their instructional reading level and for guiding them through the use of strategies in that text. This enabled growth in comprehension by allowing the student to be challenged without being frustrated. Success was ensured for each student through this type of small group instruction.

The connections made during guided reading groups appeared to have had a positive influence on students' reading levels. These connections have transferred to other subject areas and have increased students' understanding of the various texts. The transfer into content areas revealed that the students have internalized this strategy.

The significant growth among students' comprehension levels suggests that the continuation of making connections through guided reading instruction is appropriate for

ongoing student development in comprehending text. In order for this growth to occur, teachers must model their own connections to text. Modeling needs to take place over an extended period of time and with a variety of print.

Teaching strategies through guided reading groups is an effective way to help students improve their reading comprehension. One drawback of using this model is the amount of time needed to meet with the different groups daily. However, this can be remedied by involving parents in the classroom to help with monitoring other students, spending time at the beginning of the year helping students learn expectations, and utilizing resource personnel when possible.

An additional obstacle to overcome is the gathering of appropriate leveled reading materials. One solution to this problem would be to create a leveled book room obtained through private financing or funding through a grant. Another solution would be to make use of the local public library. Many libraries make available to teachers multiple copies of books for classroom use.

Aside from the obstacles, making connections has proven to be beneficial to the comprehension levels of students. With the implementation of the aforementioned strategies of overcoming the obstacles, guided reading is a viable solution to comprehension difficulties.

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Appendix A

Teacher Survey

	Consistently	Most of the time	Sometimes	Never
1. Do you see students connect what they're reading to what they've read before?	1	2	3	4
2. Do you see students make personal connections to what they're reading?	1	2	3	4
3. Do you see students relate what they've read to the world around them?	1	2	3	4
4. Do you see students using reading comprehension strategies in other content areas?	1	2	3	4
5. Do you see students independently using graphic organizers to create meaning from the text?	1	2	3	4
6. Do you feel ample time is provided in the day for reading instruction?	1	2	3	4
7. Do you teach using guided reading groups?	1	2	3	4
8. Do you provide direct instruction for reading strategies?	1	2	3	4
9. Do you feel that the students find the current reading program in your school meaningful and relevant?	1	2	3	4
10. Please indicate your current grade level.	Primary (K–2)		Intermediate (3–6)	

Appendix B

Lesson Plans

Grade Level: First

Objective: To have students make text to text connections to increase their comprehension.

Materials: "The Giant Who Threw Tantrums" from The Book of Giant Stories by David L. Harrison

Procedure: 1. Read pages 179-183 to the students to find out why the giant is throwing tantrums.
2. Discuss with students if they now have a better idea about what the giant's problem is.
3. Have the students complete the story on their own.
4. Summarize the story by asking questions.
5. Have the students think about another story that reminds them of this story and have them complete the text to text conncetion graphic organizer.

Grade Level: Third

Objective: To help students understand how making text to world connections can increase their comprehension.

Materials: Welcome Comfort by Patricia Palocco

Procedure: 1. Review with the students what a text to world connection is.
2. Preview the story by looking at the pictures and discussing what the story might be about.
3. Read the story, stopping occasionally to discuss connections the students are making and model connections as needed.
4. At the end of the story, discuss how making text to world connections helped them understand the story.

Grade Level: Fourth

Objective: To help students understand how making text to self connections can increase their comprehension.

Materials: A Cricket in Times Square by George Selden

Procedure: 1. Review chapters 1 through 4.Discuss any difficulties that the students may have encountered. Review the relationship between the main characters.
2. Have students identify a text to self connection in these chapters and complete the graphic organizer.

Grade Level: Fifth

Objective: The students will increase their comprehension of a story by making text to text connections.

Materials: The World's Wildest Roller Coasters by Michael Burgan
Graphic organizer
Pencil

Procedure: 1. Discuss making connections with students focusing on text to text connections.
2. Have students read chapter 1 silently. During this reading, students will find a part of the story that reminds them of something else they've read.
3. The students will then write and illustrate their connection.

Name_____ **Date**_____

Text to self connections

Find a part of the story that reminds you of something in your life. Draw and write about that below.

	This is a picture of_____ _____ _____ _____
	This reminds me of_____ _____ _____ _____

Name_____ **Date**_____

Text to self connections

Find a part of the story that reminds you of something in your life.

Draw and write about that below.

Example from text._____	
This reminds me of_____	

Name_____ **Date**_____

Text to text connections

Find a part of the story that reminds you of something you have read. Draw and write about that below.

	This is a picture of_____ _____ _____ _____
	This reminds me of_____ _____ _____ _____

Name_____ **Date**_____

Text to text connections

Find a part of the story that reminds you of something you have read.

Draw and write about that below.

Example from text._____	
This reminds me of_____	

Name_____ **Date**_____

Text to world connections

Find a part of the story that reminds you of something happening in the world arround you.
Draw and write about that below.

	This is a picture of_____ _____ _____ _____
	This reminds me of_____ _____ _____ _____

Name_____ **Date**_____

Text to world connections

Find a part of the story that reminds you of something happening in the world arround you.
Draw and write about that below.

Example from text._____	
This reminds me of_____	

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